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Ongoing Efforts for Peace in the Middle East

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Following is the prepared opening statement by John H. Kelly, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, for the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C., September 19, 1989.

I am very pleased to appear before the subcommittee today and to have the opportunity to discuss a number of developments which have occurred in the Middle East and Southwest Asia since I last testified before this committee in July. Today, I plan to focus on the Middle East Peace Process, Lebanon, and Iran.

Middle East Peace Process

I first wish to deal with our efforts to advance toward a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As you well know, efforts to advance the prospects of a comprehensive peace are fraught with difficulties. But there are hopeful signs as well.

On the one hand, the cycle of violence continues unabated. The human cost is high. Palestinians and Israelis continue to fall victim to violence.

This is not a time for despair, however, for there are positive signs. There is growing recognition of the need to channel efforts in the direction of practical and pragmatic steps, grounded in solid and enduring principles.

Our policy on the peace process has not changed. The peace we seek should be comprehensive, including all parties to the conflict. It should come about through direct negotiations. The negotiations should be based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and should involve territory for peace, security, and recognition for Israel and the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people.

The Israeli Government took a step toward the achievement of these goals through its peace initiative of May 14. We endorse this initiative and we continue to believe the proposal for elections in the occupied territories holds the potential to launch a political process of negotiations that can advance the prospects of peace. Since my last appearance before this committee, we have pursued our efforts on behalf of this initiative in a number of ways:

- I visited Israel, Egypt, and Jordan in August. Much of my discussions focused on the peace process. I came away convinced that the leaders of all three countries are committed to peace and anxious to move forward if mutually acceptable mechanisms can be found. [Egyptian] President Mubarak has been particularly helpful and energetic in seeking ways to advance the process, developing ideas to keep up momentum, and encouraging all sides toward moderation and flexibility. In July, he advanced a 10-point proposal which might provide a bridge for the Israelis and the Palestinians. It is important to remember that the Egyptian 10 points are not an alternative to the Government of Israel's May proposal but rather represent Egypt's acceptance of the elections concept and Egypt's views on how to get elections and make them work. We believe the Egyptian points constitute a constructive and valuable addition to ongoing diplomatic efforts. Egypt's efforts are continuing. Yesterday, Israeli Defense Minister Rabin was in Cairo for further discussions on how to bridge differences and get a dialogue started. We understand Egyptian-Israeli discussions on this will continue in the days ahead.
- In my meeting with Palestinians in Jerusalem, and in the U.S. dialogue with the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] in Tunis, we have stressed the need for a constructive response to the Israeli proposal. There are some signs recently that the PLO will move in this direction and is seriously considering Egypt's 10 points. For our part, we take our dialogue with the PLO seriously. We have told the Palestinians that we can provide no guarantees regarding final outcome—this is a matter for the negotiations. And we have explained the need for a pragmatic approach to get a process of negotiations started. Once they begin, the Palestinians will be able to bring to the table whatever preferences and positions they wish. As I noted, we are beginning to have a sense that our message may be getting through.

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• At the same time, we have continued to stress to the PLO that we will not accept efforts to have the so-called State of Palestine admitted to international organizations. The Administration shares the strongly held views of Congress on this issue. So far, we have registered success in our efforts—in the World Health Organization and the World Tourism Organization.

• Finally, we are continuing our exchanges with the Soviets on the Middle East, as recently as yesterday, when Dennis Ross (Director of Policy Planning) and I met with the Soviets. We continued to stress the advantages of the elections proposal. Our Soviet interlocutors showed serious interest in our views and posed legitimate questions. We are not yet persuaded that the Soviets will, in fact, pursue the types of policies that will contribute to real progress. This is something we will have to watch carefully and to continue to nurture.

The weeks ahead will see opportunities for continuing discussions with a variety of regional and other interested leaders. In Wyoming, where the Middle East will be on the agenda for Secretary Baker's meeting with Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, we will be using the occasion to press the Soviets to accept the Israeli elections proposal. We will have other occasions in New York at the UN General Assembly and here in Washington. We intend to make full use o these opportunities.

Lebanon

Turning to another subject, I would like to lay out for you the Administration's views about Lebanon. First, let me explain our decision to temporarily withdraw our Embassy personnel from Beirut. As we stated at the time, the action was taken when we concluded that the mission could no longer conduct its work and that there was a significantly increased risk to our American staff. The evacuation is temporary, and we intend to return our staff as soon as we are convinced that circumstances exist in which our presence can be reasonably safe and effective. The decision does not represent a change in policy. It is not, as some would say, "an abandonment of Lebanon." We are deeply committed as a nation to helping Lebanon through this difficult time, and we are deeply committed as a people to helping end the anguish and pain of all Lebanese.

We warmly welcome the decision of the Arab League Higher Committee on Lebanon to reengage. On Saturday, September 16, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud announced a seven-point Arab League plan on Lebanon. The plan consists of a cease-fire, lifting of all blockades, and a meeting of parliament to discuss national reconciliation. It also asks the Lebanese to pledge not to acquire weapons and ammunition, and asks others to pledge not to ship any to Lebanon. Finally, the implementation of the proposal begins with a trip of Arab League Assistant Secretary General Lakhdar Ibrahimi to Beirut. Ibrahimi arrived in Beirut to begin his work this past Sunday.

We believe that the Arab League's plan provides a constructive basis upon which all parties to the conflict in Lebanon can engage in a political process, devoid of violence and coercion. We are pleased that the committee calls for a cease-fire and lifting of all blockades, and sets a date for a meeting of Lebanon's parliamentarians to discuss national reconciliation. These are essential first steps on the path to restoring a strong central government in control of all of Lebanon's territory and to achieving the withdrawal of all foreign forces and the disbandment of militias, objectives we all share.

We, therefore, call upon all parties to stop the fighting, lift the blockades, and allow a political process of reconciliation to begin.

Our humanitarian commitment to Lebanon has not lessened. Our aid programs continue, administered through private voluntary organizations on the ground. U.S. food aid currently provides about half of the food for 800,000 Lebanese in all regions and communities in Lebanon. In fact, the next shipment of about $5 million of rice, lentils, and vegetable oil under PL 480 Title II food aid is due to arrive in Lebanon later this month.

This Administration considers our efforts to assist Lebanon an important part of our overall Middle East policy. We will, therefore, continue our active diplomatic efforts to promote a political resolution to the conflict that can end the senseless bloodshed and suffering.

Now is the time for all of those with an interest in bringing peace to Lebanon, and for all of those who have been involved in Lebanon, to support the tripartite committee's efforts, so that the process of peace and healing can begin.

Iran

Let me now address a subject which I know is on your minds as much as it is on mine: the eight American citizens who remain captive in Lebanon, and the separate but related question of our relationship with Iran.

It may help in thinking about these issues to remind ourselves of three basic realities:

First, the hostage issue involves the deliberate, cold-blooded, and calculated abuse of innocent people.

Second, the Iranian Government gives critical financial, political, and moral support to the groups which are responsible for this.

Third, spokesmen for the Iranian Government deny that Iran has any responsibility for the situation and condemn hostage-taking. And in the next breath, without any apparent sense of shame or logical contradiction, they add that Iran will only use its influence over the hostage-holders if the United States meets various conditions.

These facts are clear. What should we do about them?

We are mobilizing every possible resource to drive home a clear message to the Iranian leadership. We have used a variety of private channels to convey this message, but it is not a secret. Its essence is as follows: We expect you to act to obtain the release of the hostages. Your failure to do so is a fundamental obstacle to the normalization of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Our objective is to help convince the Iranian Government that it is in its own best interest to act to end the practice of international terrorism. This would remove a fundamental obstacle to the normalization of the U.S.-Iranian relationship. We have no quarrel with the system of government of the Islamic Republic. That is a matter for the Iranian people to decide. We believe that a more normal relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran, based firmly on mutual respect, would be desirable, and we don't believe Iran should be anybody's strategic preserve. Our interests would be well served by a strong, prosperous, nonaligned Iran. We would like to see Iran make a contribution to stability in the gulf and Southwest Asia instead of threatening its neighbors. We are ready to play a part in the reconstruction of the Iranian economy if Iran wants this. But none of this will be possible until the Iranian leadership turns its back, once and for all, on the practice of international terrorism.

In this regard, although there have been some encouraging statements in Tehran, Iran's behavior in the world continues to leave much to be desired. In recent weeks and months, Iran's hand has been evident in terrorist attacks in Europe and the Middle East. Iran must end these practices once and for all if it wants to rejoin the family of nations. We will continue to emphasize this message to Iran, but in the Iranian leadership itself must make its own choice. ■